

The Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda: Its Politics Beyond the Obvious

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Abstract:

The Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda is a brainchild of Danish artist Kristian von Hornsleth. In this essay I investigate ways in which it has shaped, and been shaped by, political discussions in Uganda. I assess how it is intricately interlaced into a complex nexus between art, art-activism and the welfare state. I argue that while giving hope to the poor, Hornsleth has redefined the limits of the nation-state using his project; he has tapped into a debate on the performance of the ruling NRM administration. In the process he has exposed two important issues simultaneously. One, he has demonstrated that artists can emancipate society albeit through controversial means. Two, he has demonstrated that foreign aid is tied to capitalist and imperialist hegemonies. Donors harbour selfish motives which can (and must) be de-sacralised and questioned in order to protect the weak and vulnerable. I submit that these issues have not been emphasised during the raging debate on the Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda.

The Problem of Rural Poverty in Uganda

Uganda is a landlocked country located in East Africa. It shares borders with the Sudan to the north, the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west, Rwanda to the southwest, Tanzania to the south and Kenya to the east. It has a population of over 28 million inhabitants. After its independence from colonial rule in 1962 Uganda played host to state-sponsored bloodshed, mayhem and terrorism until the National Resistance Movement (NRM) came to power in 1986 following a protracted five-year rebellion. Since then, the country has enjoyed some relative stability. It has, however, battled with the persistent problem of rural poverty. Significant financial and technical resources have been mobilised through national, bilateral and multilateral sources and invested in projects intended to ameliorate the situation. These efforts have yielded some results. For example there are more health centres in the countryside; infant mortality is falling; many Ugandans have access to free education; new roads have been built and old ones upgraded; the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has increased while its foreign debt has fallen. However, the continued presence of a large number of poor Ugandans located on the fringes of Uganda's fast-growing economy is unacceptable. It has prompted government to seek local and international help. It is against this backdrop that in 2006 the Hornsleth Art Project, also called the Hornsleth¹ Village Project Uganda, was born.

The Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda: Its Background

In June 2006 the Hornsleth Art Project started in Uganda. Its founder, Kristian von Hornsleth, joined a long list of enterprising (and philanthropic) Europeans who have explored ways in which art can help Ugandans to emancipate themselves. However, unlike his predecessors (and Margaret Trowell can be specifically mentioned here because of her immense contribution to the evolution of contemporary art in Uganda), Hornsleth is not an art instructor. He has thus defied the long colonial legacy of improving local art/craft skills through the introduction of western visual vocabulary and materials. Neither is he a connoisseur/art dealer. He has

therefore not linked Uganda's various art/crafts into the international art circuit. On the contrary he deploys his artistic skills, activism and financial resources to improve agricultural production while waging a campaign against economic marginalisation and exploitation. In short, although it is an art project, the Hornsleth Art Project does not sell/produce art. Rather it is a site for action against a paternalistic and capitalist hegemonies which have disenfranchised many in Uganda and elsewhere; it is a radical political movement.

The Hornsleth Art Project had very humble beginnings: 110 signatures were collected from residents in Mukono District to register the project as a community-based organisation (CBO). On 29 June 2006, during its official launch in Buteyongera village, 213 pigs and 25 goats were distributed to registered members although sheep were later added to the list. On their part, the recipients of

...piglets [are] required to give back half of the first piglets that each of the donated animal[s] produced...those with goats are required to give back to the project one kid from the first birth, while a sheep owner gives back one lamb. The animals given back to the project are redistributed to other beneficiaries who also return the first products of their animals for the cycle to continue.²

Let us take stock of three issues, implicit in the above excerpt, which have helped the Hornsleth Art Project to maximise its efficiency and satisfy the needs of its members. One, its structure is simple: it does not require experts to interpret it to its largely rural, semi-illiterate membership. Two, its operations are therefore not hindered by long bureaucracies, corruption and red-tape which have become the hallmarks of the so-called "poverty-eradication projects" run by the government of Uganda (and one can cite the infamous Rural Farmers Scheme as an example). Three, the project has an in-built capacity to sustain itself and expand. Thus, although initially intended to benefit rural households, the project quickly spread to other areas. Currently it has attracted membership from urban centres, including Kampala, the capital city.

Between June and December the project widened its priorities. Instead of emphasising rural production which is largely subsistent, it engaged a very ambitious plan of modernising rural agriculture and exporting to markets in Europe. To ensure success it provides veterinary and agricultural extension services. This, in a situation where districts are struggling to recruit and maintain agricultural extension staff at all levels, is a good gesture which has greatly helped the beneficiaries of the Hornsleth Art Project.

By December 2006 the project had stabilised household incomes for over 5,000 Ugandans and diversified the rural economy. Joyce Hornsleth Sabaddu explained how: "I am a farmer, but sometimes we have poor harvests." Her statement highlighted the instability of Uganda's predominantly agricultural economy and its potential to disrupt livelihoods. She affirmed that since it encourages "mixed farming", the project has stabilised household incomes for many. It can thus be argued that it is because of this impact on the local economy that the local leadership applauded the project. For example, Deo Nsereko, the Resident District Commissioner (RDC) of Mukono District, argued that "you have to come down to Mukono to realise how popular this project is. What I have seen is encouraging" while urging other donors to emulate Hornsleth's example and initiate similar projects in Uganda.³

However, just as its popularity soared the Hornsleth Art Project sparked a divisive debate; it grabbed the attention of Uganda's fast-growing print and electronic media. But before I extend this debate I need to trace the philosophy in which the artist grounded his project. This

analysis will expose the important philosophical (and ideological) issues which Hornsleth intends through his project in Uganda but which his critics have missed.

“Beyond the Obvious”: Kristian von Hornsleth’s Philosophy

Kristian von Hornsleth is more than an artist. He is a philosopher and an architect. He is “a futilist in the creation of pictures, sculptures and buildings” grounded in his philosophy of “futilism”. As he defines it, “futilism is the philosophy of opening doors to the hidden, to the illicit, and to what is beyond the obvious, the rational and apparent meaningful aspects of culture.”⁴ Staffan Boije af Gärne elaborates that:

The word Futilism is a combination of the word Futile and the suffix -ism. Futile is what is insignificant or meaningless. The -ism in relation to the futile, is the process [in other words a] way of looking at what is considered futile or meaningless.⁵

Put differently, the philosophy of futilism allows for a discussion of a phenomenon which is relegated to the fringes of mainstream conversations – a phenomenon on which “we normally turn our backs ...either because we are scared of it or because we simply do not see it” as Boije af Gärne puts it. It empowers; it emancipates; it demystifies the sacred.

In the following sections I analyse how, located on this philosophical platform, Hornsleth has made a notch (or what he calls a “temple where nothing is sacred”) in the wider web of discourses on globalisation, culture, foreign aid, power, domination, governance and service delivery. I probe ways in which the artist has upset sanitised and moralist debates which confine aesthetics and revulsion/outrage in two distinct, and dimetrically opposed, categories as he champions the cause of the weak, the marginalised, the disenfranchised.

On the Side of the Weak, the Marginalised: Hornsleth’s Art as Activism

Kristian von Hornsleth fights for those whose lives are plagued by the recurrent problems imposed by modernity and capitalism: poverty, disease, exploitation, marginalisation and vulnerability. This is not to suggest that he resolves *all* problems associated with modernity and capitalism. “On the contrary”, as he explains in his “Futilistic Manifest[o]”⁶, he is not. Instead, he provokes an intellectual dialogue on them. Not as a bystander, a disinterested artist-observer. Rather, he invokes Gustave Courbet’s strategy of using art to represent the artist’s active engagement in political activism.

Courbet converged “artistic and political radicalism” (Cox 1977 & 1982, 7) as he defied normative artistic standards and “the prevailing political system” (ibid.). He also actively took part in radical movements which sought to emancipate the marginalised. This is the art-politics nexus he visualised in his *Studio of a Painter* (1854-55). In this painting Courbet located the artist at the centre of a visual allegory in which the *avant-garde* artist joined the struggle for the emancipation of the peasants and the working class.

Like Courbet, Hornsleth asserts his role as the vanguard of the socialist struggles he visualises in his idioms. Unlike Courbet, who turned his studio into a site for political action, Hornsleth translates photographs, works by old masters, posters, African masks, the human body, found material, etc., into sites for his political activism. He locates his name at the centre of his idioms. In the process his name ceases to be a signature and begins to symbolise his active participation in the very radical struggles he visualises. On the one hand, the works look subordinated to the name imposed on their surfaces. On the other, the presence of the name

allows the artist to affirm and confirm his participation in the issues he raises. Hornsleth's art becomes a site for political action in which the artist is as an active observer, a witness, a champion of the war against exploitation and marginalisation. Thus Hornsleth's works have sociopolitical currency.

Through art-activism (or art as activism) the artist has unleashed a sustained onslaught on western cultural imperialism, modernity and global capitalism. For example in his *W.F.G.N.M. Welcome Futilism Goodbye Nekrophiliac Modernity* (1996) (1), Hornsleth radically attacks the legitimacy of modernity. He recalls Dadaist, Surrealist and Expressionist styles although, as we read in his *Dean M 2002* (2002), he sees himself as a loyal and direct descendant of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, William Anastasi and Bradshaw: the Abstract Expressionists.

W.F.G.N.M. is a summary of Hornsleth's (postmodernist) critique on the essence of modernity and capitalism. The artist uses this painting to expose the recklessness and predatory behaviour with which the West imposes a ruthless capitalist regime on poor countries. For Hornsleth



1. Kristian von Hornsleth,
*W.F.G.N.M. Welcome Futilism
Goodbye Nekrophiliac Modernity*,
acrylic and paper on canvas, The
Copenhagen Police Art Club
Collection, 1996.

capitalism is rapacious: it “kills”, it “rapes”, it “steals”, it “burns”. It has affected the lives of many located on the fringes of the mainstream global economy. As we read in his *Fuck the Poor* (2006) (2), capitalism has four major preoccupations, namely: to “fuck the old”, to “fuck nature”, to “fuck the sick” and to “fuck the poor”. This is so because the proponents of capitalism (and modernity) are self-seeking “no[u]veau riche communists forever” whose hedonistic quest for self-pleasure blinds them towards the pathetic conditions faced by the poor - and he makes a similar statement in his *Just be Rich* (2006), *G.A.J.S. Get a Job Sucker* (1996) and his *It's my Job* (1998) among others. Hornsleth enunciates another interesting critique in his *It's my Job* that merits extended analysis because it has a complex symbolism which raises issues that have entangled Hornsleth's activism (just like Eve Ensler's) in controversy.

But is it Art as Activism or Pervertedness? Hornsleth and Eve Ensler

In his *It's my Job* (3) Hornsleth confronts us with those who are disadvantaged and alienated



2..Kristian von Hornsleth, *Fuck the Poor*, acrylic and paper print on canvas, private collection, 2006.



3. Kristian von Hornsleth, *It's my Job*, Acrylic and paper on canvas, private collection, 1988.

by capitalism and modernity. With the emaciated body of a crying child as its central figure, Hornsleth uses the painting to draw our attention to the voiceless, the vulnerable. He however

avoids all subtleties and modesty; he subverts the aesthetic while transforming art into a powerful counter-hegemonic device. Whereas he used the picture of a child whose genitalia had been covered with a cloth to allow the picture to communicate the pathetic human condition without sexualising it, Hornsleth altered the photo to express his radical statements and blur the line between aesthetics and revulsion/outrage. In the process he abandoned any semblance of political correctness as he added female breasts and an erect male penis to the lean body of a child. As is obvious in the painting, the fullness of the breasts and the erectness of the penis sharply contrast the tenderness and vulnerability elicited by the body of the child. This articulation allows *It's my Job* to generate a multiplicity of meanings. On the one hand, the artwork speaks of/for the poor, the hungry and the sick. On the other, the painting is a site for raising issues of politics, sexuality and power. It is interesting to note how Hornsleth engages these issues with such boldness, reminding us of what Austin Bukenya, writing in Alex Mukulu's *30 Years of Bananas* (1992), calls a "daring mention" (p.ix) of political issues. However, the artist also eroticises the child and ultimately the pathetic human condition, generating a complex debate which, as I am about to demonstrate, has sucked his works deep into a mire of political controversy.

And yet Hornsleth's *It's my Job* is not isolated in its multiplicity of meaning and boldness on issues of politics, sex and power. Its graphic symbolism spans the artist's archive posted on the internet. We see on his website works which could be [mis]read as visual glorifications of pornography, lewdness, incest, immorality and violence. This may explain, in part, why Robby Muhumuza, writing for the *Sunday Vision* of 15 October 2006, contended that Hornsleth's on-line archive consists of "sickeningly shocking photos of violent pornography that glorifies sexual defilement, homosexual and lesbian sexual orgies, rape, murder and blasphemy". There are many artworks which may have outraged Muhumuza, including Hornsleth's *I.O.T.B.L. Its Okay to Be Alone* (2002). This particular work needs specific mention because its symbolism raises a problematic taboo subject which Ensler raised before Hornsleth and angered many conservatives and traditionalists in Uganda.



4. Kristian von Hornsleth, *I.O.T.B.L. It's Okay To Be Lonely*, acrylic and paper on canvas, private collection, 2002.

In *I.O.T.B.L. Its Okay to Be Alone* (4) the artist depicts two hands opening a hairy vagina as if to expose its erect clitoris and engorged labia. Since the artist avails the vagina for the consumption of a prying libidinous gaze, it could be argued that he reduced the woman to an object of sexual desire. This kind of visual representation fits into Hornsleth's use of nudity to critique issues of politics, sex and power. It however subverts normative cultural norms held by many religious moralist and traditionalist conservatives in Uganda for whom it is taboo to speak of the human genitalia in such graphic terms. In fact my ethnic group, the Baganda, call it *okwogera ebitayita mu kamwa* (literally translated, 'speaking words which are too big to pass through the mouth'). For the Baganda 'indirect mention' through long phraseologies, like *ebifo by'ekyama* (a Luganda term which translates private parts), are preferred. Thus in raising issues of power and sexuality using the metaphor of the vagina, and nudity, Hornsleth's visual archive has been considered obscene and rejected in the same way as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* was rejected.

In 2005 Ensler was scheduled to stage her *Vagina Monologues* in Uganda. The play, at least in Ensler's opinion, demystifies the female genitalia while raising issues of sexuality and power. The play was also intended to raise funds to support humanitarian activities in northern Uganda. Since this region has been plagued by war, pillage, destitution, mayhem, hunger and misery, some anti-war activists, women activists and charitable organisations applauded Ensler's intervention.

Now, in the foreword to Ensler's book *The Vagina Monologues* (1998; 2001), Gloria Steinem writes:

I come from the "down there" generation. That is, those were the words – spoken rarely and in a hushed voice – that the women in my family used to refer to all female genitalia, internal or external (p. ix).

Put in other words, just like it is in Uganda, Ensler's own Western culture is not comfortable with graphic references to the female genitalia (in fact in the book Ensler gives us a long list of indirect phrases used instead). But Ensler, empowered by what Steinem called the "spirit of self-knowledge and freedom", subverted this convention and the traditional orthodoxy which shaped it. She turned the vagina into an object for open public discussion and entertainment. For her it was a fitting metaphor for articulating complex issues of sexuality and power.

Since 1986, when the National Resistance Movement came to power, issues of power and sexuality have been widely debated in Uganda. Such a discussion culminated into the inclusion of over five articles in the 1995 Constitution of Uganda recognising women's rights and outlawing discrimination. Put in other words, Ensler tapped into a popular debate. But her use of the vagina as a communicative device provoked revulsion. Hence, although the play touches on issues which have galvanised women activists in Uganda, the *Vagina Monologues* divided the women's movement. Also, far from her stated aim, Ensler was accused of using the play to publicise her homosexuality, vulgarity, obscenity and immorality. The *Vagina Monologues* was dubbed "the first-ever pornographic play" to be staged in Uganda. The government of Uganda was called to intervene. After evaluating its script, a government commission (the Media Council) summarily banned the play⁷.

Like Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, Hornsleth's *I.O.T.B.L It's Okay to be Lonely* and much of his visual archive, that is posted on the internet, has stirred emotions in Uganda. Consequently the artist has been labelled a "pervert". His artworks have been rejected as obscene, vulgar

and immoral. Writing in a leading local English daily, *The New Vision* of 21 October 2006, one Esther Luna expressed the intensity of her revulsion towards Hornsleth's on-line visual archive and literature. "I recently visited www.hornsleth.com and was appalled at the dirty language and ugly images there"⁸ she narrated. Anisha Shahir gave more details while dragging Hornsleth's activities in Uganda into the debate. Writing in *The New Vision* of 26 November 2006, Shahir recounted her experience as follows:

I have been following the Hornsleth [art] 'project' in the press. I tried to find out a bit more from his website (www.hornsleth.com) and it was shocking to find weird pictures which portray the real Hornsleth. He is a devil worshipper and his movement is like a cult.⁹

Although there is an anti-hegemonic stance which is unambiguous in Hornsleth's artworks and literature posted on the internet, it is clear here that there has been growing anxiety, in Uganda, that Hornsleth harbours hegemonic ambitions and that he is a loyal agent of Western cultural imperialism. To many his Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda is therefore a "scandal"¹⁰, a dangerous precedent set by a "43-year-old Danish artist with a wicked and twisted mind" (Muhumuza, *Sunday Vision*, 15 October 2006).

As such the country's legislature was drawn into the debate. Joseph Mugambe, a Member of Parliament who represents the region where the project started, was compelled to explain to the nation the circumstances surrounding the project. His explanation did little to soothe the escalating tensions and revulsion. The opposition gained political capital. Beti Kamywa (opposition Member of Parliament for Lubaga North) contended, with cynicism, that the continued presence of Kristian von Hornsleth in the country demonstrated that the organs of the state were in slumber and impotent. "Cult sneaks in, security sleeping" she warned. But have these critics not missed the point?

Development Aid, "Pure Business", Identity-Shift, Exploitation, or Art-activism? The Debate

As we read in the press (and his website), Hornsleth uses his project in Uganda to expose the illicit intentions of donors. With almost 50 percent of Uganda's budget funded by donor agencies, Uganda is one of the countries which heavily depend on foreign aid. This has had negative implications for the country. For instance, Uganda spends a significant percentage of its annual Gross National Product on debt-servicing and repayment. Besides, there are stringent conditions which come with donor-funding. A combination of these factors has entangled Uganda into what Colin Leys, in his book *The Rise and Fall of Development Theory* (1996), calls the "African tragedy". Kateregga, a member of the Hornsleth Art Project, explained why, instead of helping the poor, foreign aid has informed a socioeconomic tragedy (which is what Leys calls the "African tragedy"). He argued :

"...aid is given to poor countries with one hand and demands are given with the other hand....In other words: [foreign] aid is conditional, it is *pure business* and not really something that will benefit the poor countries in the long run...."¹¹

And these are the issues which Hornsleth critiques through the Hornsleth Art Project.¹² He "donates animals" to registered members in order to improve their household incomes. But, as is the case with foreign aid, there is a trade-off, or what the artist calls a "*business deal*", namely that the recipients must fulfil certain conditions. Most significant (and problematic as well) is the condition that:

...the beneficiaries [swear] affidavits through a Jinja-based law firm, Muziransa Associated Advocates, to change their identities to include the name [H]ornsleth.¹³

Jinja is an industrial town located 50 kilometres east of Kampala. It is here that thousands of Ugandans have signed legal documents acceding to the alteration of their names. It is through this process that Henry Hornsleth Kayondo and Joyce Hornsleth Sabaddu, both of whom I have cited in this essay, adopted Hornsleth as their middle name. All the other thousands of beneficiaries have done the same.

Beneficiaries have welcomed Hornsleth's intervention. They reject anti-Hornsleth criticism as a misrepresentation of the artist's good intentions, humanitarianism and philanthropy. According to the project coordinator, Henry Hornsleth Kayondo, "the project [is] not a religion"; it has nothing to do with Hornsleth's sexuality. On the contrary it emancipates the rural poor whose life expectancy is low "not because [they] want to die that early, but simply because [they] do not have a single coin with which to buy medicine and the basic necessities to keep living."¹⁴ And this, for Kayondo, is the endemic problem which the Hornsleth Art Project addresses: "...we the residents glorify this project" argued Kayondo before adding, "it has transformed our lives and we will not do anything to harm it."¹⁵ He challenged critics, arguing that "if anybody is not happy with [Kristian von] Hornsleth, they are free to fund us and we shall never call ourselves Hornsleth again."¹⁶ Implicitly he questioned the rationale, and highlighted the futility, of the anti-Hornsleth campaign if it is not backed by alternative strategies of poverty eradication. As 45-year-old Hornsleth Matiya explained, it is futile to sanctify identity under conditions of economic poverty and misery. "Much as I respect myself and my name I cannot die for a name if there is a helping hand somewhere,"¹⁷ he argued while de-sacralising, demystifying and materialising the notions of identity inherent in his African name. In short the beneficiaries see potential benefits from the project; this underlies the project's continued popularity in spite of the harsh criticism it has attracted and its potential to interfere with normative patterns of identity.

There are voices which have supported this view. For example, in a letter published in the *New Vision* of 10 September 2006, one Muganga Kizito argued that the local peasantry had followed a well-trodden African path. "The same phenomenon happens a lot in many African governments, including the Kampala establishment" he observed. To qualify his assertion, Kizito referred to the association of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) of which Uganda is a member. During its 2006 conference, the association persuaded donor agencies and countries to forgive its members the colossal debt they owed. Consequently effective from 1 July 2006 Uganda had its \$3.7 billion debt waived; its indebtedness reduced dramatically. The money saved has been invested in social services, health and education. Hence, Kizito observed, "by taking on the name HIPC, some of their loans were reduced." He then drew parallels with the Hornsleth Art Project, concluding that what HIPC had done "correlates well with what the Mukono peasants are doing." In short, what is happening in the Hornsleth Art Project is premised on perceived economic benefits. The government of Uganda does not practise what it preaches. Its attack on the project, and the nationalist, patriotic, moral and ethical platforms from which such attack was launched, lacks credibility.

To showcase his invention, and intervention, Hornsleth invited the Danish National TV DR2 to film his activities in Uganda. He also photographed the project's beneficiaries. On 17 November 2006 Hornsleth mounted the first exhibition of portraits from Uganda at the

Politikens Hus and later at the Hornsleth & Friends Gallery, in Copenhagen (Denmark). The film and portrait exhibitions introduced his western audience to his activities in Uganda; they gave his project wider publicity. That he used his money to fund all this, in addition to the other resources that he has invested in the project, would suggest that Kristian von Hornsleth is a rich middle-class Danish artist using his resources to question the aims of foreign aid while expanding the limits and definition of art and art-activism. “Don’t worry, this is art!” Hornsleth writes on his website.

And yet the aesthetic in his exhibitions was overwhelmed by the problematic political and economic issues implicit in his project. For example, it was reported in the local press that each of the 100x100cm photographs exhibited had a price tag of 5,000 Danish Krona or 1,500,000 Uganda shillings. In a country where the majority have no wage to speak of, a few earn a pathetic minimum wage, and the salary of a university professor (with a PhD and over twenty years of service) is 1,800,000 Uganda shillings (after tax) or 6,000 Danish Krona, this price tag was bound to attract resentment. Secondly, in this context the exhibitions begin to tap into a form of power relationship which must be questioned. In fact the press report helped critics to argue that what Hornsleth called art was couched in the exploitation of Uganda’s rural poor. This debate was provoked by two issues which are implicit in the Hornsleth Art Project. One, it appeared that Hornsleth exploits “the poor, vulnerable and ignorant”. And two, the artist has tampered with people’s identity. He has upset the established tribal tapestry of the country and subverted sacred patrimonies while constructing himself a tribe -- a fiefdom. As if to escalate these fears Hornsleth wrote on the internet: “I just bought a village in Africa” (cited by Robby Muhumuza in *Sunday Vision*, 15 October 2006).

As such critics pejoratively re-branded the Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda, calling it a “name-for-a-pig project”, or a “village pig project”, and dubbed it “one of the most controversial schemes in Uganda’s history” funded by a “silly European”, a “lousy foreigner”. Its beneficiaries were dismissed as disgraceful, unpatriotic and lacking a sense of “self-respect as Ugandans”. Writing from Cairo, Achilles Kiwanuka Kasozi explained why this is the case:

Hornsleth has started giving out piglets[, sheep] and goats on condition that the beneficiaries adopt his name. In African cultures, a name is, among other things, a symbol of belonging to a people, a clan, a family, a particular situation. It is not distinct from what a person really is, that is, his or her identity. The so-called Hornsleth [Art P]roject is just another way of robbing our people of the little dignity and self-esteem they still possess. In fact, the whole thing smells of slavery.¹⁸

Local FM stations joined in the debate.

Thus, although his development aid is popular with the masses and was initially welcomed by the Uganda government, that it involves identity-shifts was considered abhorrent. As such the project became “a matter of concern”. “Why should the Government of Uganda look on as its poor citizens are taken advantage of by some crazy artist?” Robby Muhumuza asked in the *Sunday Vision* of 15 October 2006. “It is unfortunate [H]ornsleth has chosen to abuse Uganda and her citizens in such an open way and the government is only talking and not taking any action against him”, complained Willy Kisitu in the *New Vision* of 15 November 2006.

Admittedly, critics would be justified to monitor the project and openly debate Hornsleth's intentions. They have, however, missed three important issues which give weight to the artist's intervention. One is that Hornsleth himself is aware of these complex political and economic issues and how the rich have engaged them to exploit and marginalise the poor, the weak and the environment. Secondly, critics have missed the fact that rather than legitimating (and propagating) them, the artist has used his project (and art) to provoke debate on them while bringing to the fore Henry Hornsleth Kayondo's claim to which I alluded earlier (but which is also Kristian von Hornsleth's) that foreign aid is, after all, "pure business". Few in Uganda have attempted this debate; government cannot engage in it openly for fear of alienating its development partners. Visually, few contemporary Ugandan artists, for example Fred Kato Mutebi in his print *World Bank* (1990s), have engaged in it. Their scale has, however, not matched Hornsleth's; neither have they provoked public debate. The third issue has involved the redefinition of the paradigm of the nation-state. It therefore merits extended analysis.

Doing the "Unacceptable"? Hornsleth Re-shapes the Paradigm of the Nation-State

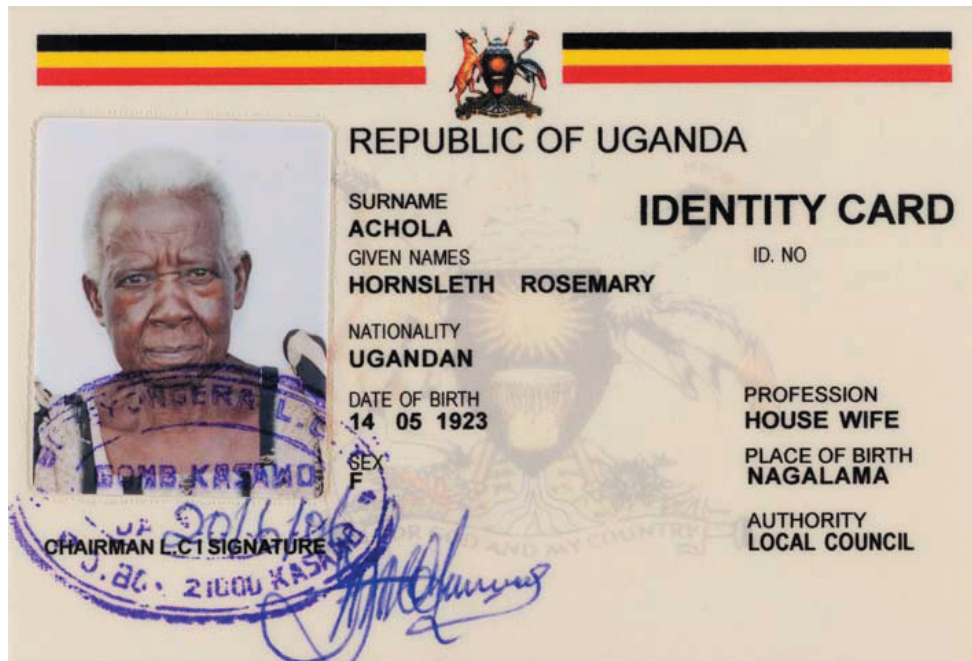
Hornsleth's exhibitions angered many nationalists in Uganda and the Diaspora. They were considered "unacceptable and aimed at dehumanising Ugandans" in the words of Minister Nsaba Buturo. Hence although Parliament's initial reaction was mild -- for example legislators argued that "it is okay if Hornsleth wants to help the people but he should not change their names"¹⁹ -- government promised decisive action, which it delivered in the following ways:

First, if Hornsleth had hoped to have 110 peasants travel to Copenhagen to attend the opening ceremony, this was decisively blocked. His so-called "family" was denied travel documents. Threats that the affected parties would petition the Constitutional Court in a bid to fight for their legitimate right to have a passport fell on deaf ears. Ultimately government "frustrated" attempts by the beneficiaries to attend the opening ceremony. The spectacle was averted; national prestige was jealously guarded.

Secondly, it was suggested that Kristian von Hornsleth had abused the instruments of the state through his exhibition. His use of the colours of the Ugandan flag on the invitation cards, for example, was considered disrespectful. Thus the Danish government was asked to censure the shows.²⁰ Because the Danes refused to intervene, the government of Uganda threatened unilateral action. "I am drafting a letter to the Foreign Affairs Minister who has agreed to take appropriate action" Minister Nsaba Buturo explained in an obvious attempt to allay public anxiety and appeal to nationalist sentiments. "We will present our dissatisfaction and protest. This will be done in Copenhagen" he announced while insinuating that the NRM government had taken corrective measures and that it was still in control of the situation.²¹

It was necessary that the government of Uganda comes out strongly to demonstrate that it was still in charge of the situation. Citing Engel's thesis, Norberto Bobbio (1985) argues that "the state, just as it had an origin, will also have an end and it will finish when the causes that produced it disappear" (p.125). Bobbio explains that there are two distinct ways through which state-decomposition can manifest itself: "the end of the state" and "the crisis of the state". Important to my discussion is Bobbio's crisis of the state. As it is defined by the old school (and Bobbio), "by the crisis is meant...a crisis of the democratic state unable to deal with the demands from civil society which have been provoked by itself..." (ibid.). In short, the crisis of the state results from a government's failure to honour its promise to emancipate its population; it is an indelible sign of the impotence of the state.

I posit that Kristian von Hornsleth's project, and its popularity, has exposed the government's impotence. It has provoked debate on the government's failure to eliminate rural poverty in spite of the numerous promises it has made since 1986. As if to confirm my claim one Jimmy Hornsleth Ntalo argued: "We are grateful to [Kristian von] Hornsleth for coming to our rescue [because] the Government has forgotten us." In light of Ntalo's claim, it can be argued that Hornsleth has succeeded where the ruling NRM has failed for the past two decades: he has empowered the people economically. As a result the artist has decisively re-defined the limits of the nation-state; he has come into direct competition with it. As if to illustrate my assertion, the project gives identity cards to its members which, as reported in the press, are "national Uganda ID card[s]" (5). Decorated with the national flag at the top, authenticated with the Coat of Arms and the inscription "Republic of Uganda", the card has most of the key features which give it the character of a national identity document. This is an interesting development, considering that the government of Uganda has failed to produce a national identity document because of bureaucratic red tape, bribery, influence-peddling and corruption. It suggests that Hornsleth has carved himself an effective, welfare, mini-state by exploiting the illicit intentions of development aid and the failure of the NRM government to deliver on its promises to eliminate rural poverty.



5. Rosemary Hornsleth Achola's identity card showing national symbols and authenticated by the local administration. All beneficiaries of the project carry similar cards. In the absence of a national identity card, such a card could pass as a national identity document.

Located in this political matrix, the Hornsleth Art Project has tapped into the raging debate on the performance of the ruling NRM. I contend that although issues of public order, morality and ethics have been raised, it is against this backdrop that the government, which initially supported the project (through Deo Nsereko the RDC), has turned round to block it. Claims that the project has had a positive impact on its membership have been rejected, with Minister Nsaba Buturo reducing Hornsleth and his project to a "travesty [which] the government cannot sit back and watch." In other words, rather than celebrating the artist's commitment to community empowerment and philanthropy, in a rare show of inhospitality

many radical nationalists have resorted to character assassination. Instead of being viewed as a partner in development (which, by the way, would have been the case) Kristian von Hornsleth has been rejected as a “*persona non grata*”, in fact “an evil man... simply spreading his cultic beliefs pretending to be concerned with helping poor people...”²² Government demonised him questioning his mental health, morality, sexuality, and intentions. Hornsleth is “satanic, a racist, homosexual and a mental case”, diagnosed Minister Nsaba Buturo before warning that dealing with the artist was tantamount to getting oneself “into real trouble”. The Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda became a subject of police investigation.

Conclusion

Kristian von Hornsleth has emancipated the poor through his Hornsleth Art Project in Uganda. He has demonstrated the positive role artists, and art-activism, can play in the economic empowerment of those marginalised, and ignored, on the fringes of a modern[ising] market-driven economy. Yet his intervention has attracted sharp criticism from Ugandans at home and abroad; the government of Uganda has constricted his activities. There is a probing question which I need to raise as I conclude, and Kenneth Ongalo-Obote put it directly, namely that: “What exactly has Hornsleth (sic) done?”²³ As it has been demonstrated in this essay, it is not entirely correct to suggest that the Hornsleth Art Project is dangerous and ill-intentioned. The claim that Kristian von Hornsleth has exploited the poor and threatened the identity, moral and ethical fabrics of Ugandans has been contested; it has missed Hornsleth’s ideological stance against exploitation. I thus submit two issues. One is that Hornsleth has exposed the failure of the nation-state to eradicate rural poverty while presenting the artist as a guarantor of socioeconomic welfare. Since many contemporary artists in Uganda are still struggling to find ways of emancipating their poverty-stricken communities, I submit that Hornsleth’s success be acknowledged and emulated. And two, I submit that Kristian von Hornsleth has decisively exposed the selfishness and self-aggrandisement with which the so-called “development aid” is given to poor countries. These issues, I argue, constitute the politics “beyond the obvious” (to use Hornsleth’s phrase) which many critics have missed during the raging debate on the Hornsleth Village Project Uganda.

Endnotes

- ¹ Reading from Hornsleth’s website it is clear that Hornsleth has adopted this name for many of the projects in which he critiques the problems of modernity and capitalism. On the signpost for the project, whose image is also posted on the internet, Hornsleth adopted a similar name. This is why I use it here.
- ² See: Mugisa Anne, “Villagers Change Names for Pigs” in the *New Vision*, September 5, 2006.
- ³ See: Ogwang Joel, “What’s in a Name” in *The New Vision*, November 4, 2006.
- ⁴ See artist’s “The Futuristic Manifest” published on-line at: <http://www.hornsleth.com/template/t02.php?menuId=42&articleId=1>
- ⁵ For more see Staffan Boije af Gärne, “Structure your Perceptions” published on-line at: <http://www.hornsleth.com/template/t02.php?menuId=3&articleId=11>
- ⁶ See artist’s “The Futuristic Manifest”.
- ⁷ More on this is articulated in Ahimbisibwe Fortunate, ““Council Stops Vagina Monologues””, in *The New Vision*, February 16, 2005. Also see Emasu Alice, “Career almost cost Nakawesi her Family”, in *The New Vision*, January 28, 2007.
- ⁸ And this point is made in Luna Esther, “When will we act on the truth about Hornsleth?” in *The New Vision*, October 21, 2006.

- ⁹ See: Shahir Anisha, “I offer a cow to Hronsleth” in *The New Vision*, November 24, 2006.
- ¹⁰ This was reflected in the headlines in the local print and audio media. For example see: Tusubira Deusdedit, “Project is a Scandal” in *The New Vision*, October 17, 2006.
- ¹¹ This point is made in Ogwang Joel, “What’s in a Name” in *The New Vision*, November 4, 2006. My emphasis.
- ¹² See artist’s website www.hornsleth.com.
- ¹³ For more see Mugisa Anne, “Villagers Change Names for Pigs” in the *New Vision*, September 5, 2006.
- ¹⁴ And these issues were raised in the press. For example see Ogwang Joel, “What’s in a Name” in *The New Vision*, November 4, 2006.
- ¹⁵ For more see Candia Stephen, “Hornsleth Show Angers Government”, in *The New Vision*, November 15, 2006.
- ¹⁶ See Kibuuka Lumu, “Hornsleth Project Expands” in *The New Vision*, November 22, 2006. Also see: Ogwang Joel, *The New Vision*, November 4, 2006.
- ¹⁷ See: Ogwang Joel, “What’s in a Name” in *The New Vision*, November 4, 2006.
- ¹⁸ For this debate see Kasozi Kiwanuka Achilles, “Hornsleth, Africans are more worth”, in *The New Vision*, September 7, 2006.
- ¹⁹ See: Kaigwa Florence, “Hornsleth exploiting the poor” in *The New Vision*, November 20, 2006. Also see Namutebi Joyce, “MPs Rap Hornsleth Project”, in *The New Vision* September 21, 2006.
- ²⁰ See: Candia Stephen, “Hornsleth Show Angers Government”, in *The New Vision*, November 15, 2006.
- ²¹ See: Candia Stephen, “Hornsleth Show Angers Government”, in *The New Vision*, November 15, 2006.
- ²² See Candia Stephen, “Hornsleth Satanic, Says Minister Buturo” in *The New Vision*, October 26, 2006; Nyakoojo HGK, *The New Vision*, November 18, 2006.
- ²³ See: Ongalo-Obote Kenneth, “Hornsleth has done no wrong!” in *The New Vision*, October 6, 2006.

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